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Public's security insensitivity, or changed security perceptions?

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Public's security perceptions and the urgency of discussing new security strategy at an era of nuclear-armed North Korea¹

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Is Security Numbness of the Public a Problem?

With North Korea's decision to tentatively close the Kaesong Industrial Complex, followed by its call towards foreigners to leave South Korea, tensions are increasing on the Korean Peninsula. Against this backdrop, South Korean people's insensitivity to security threat has emerged again as a controversial issue, notably in the media and the political community. The fact that South Korean people maintain calm and usual daily lives despite the hair-triggering crisis is perceived abnormal. However, it is not appropriate to criticize South Koreans' calm and unconcerned response to North Korean threat.

First, given that the first objective of the government's initial response is to prevent and stabilize unrest among the public, it is not deplorable that the public maintain stability for themselves. Second, calm response of the public to North Korean provocations serves as a factor that deters security crisis from having a ripple effect on the economy. If South Korean people reacted the same way as they did in the early 1990s when they resorted to panic buying of daily necessities and emergency goods as North Korea threatened to turn Seoul into a sea of fire, it would have had a substantial impact on South Korean stock and financial market and even foreign investment in Korea. Third, the surveys on the perceptions of the South Korean public on security situations, which have been conducted since the 2000s, show that they are not ignorant or insensitive to the security conditions. Their perceptions of security have shown sensitivity to the worsening of the inter-Korean relations and changes in security conditions on the Korean Peninsula. That is, if inter-Korean relations improve, people's sense of insecurity reduces, while soured inter-Korean relations cause people to worry about security and feel more favorably towards the ROK-US alliance. Such typical patterns are observed in the public surveys.

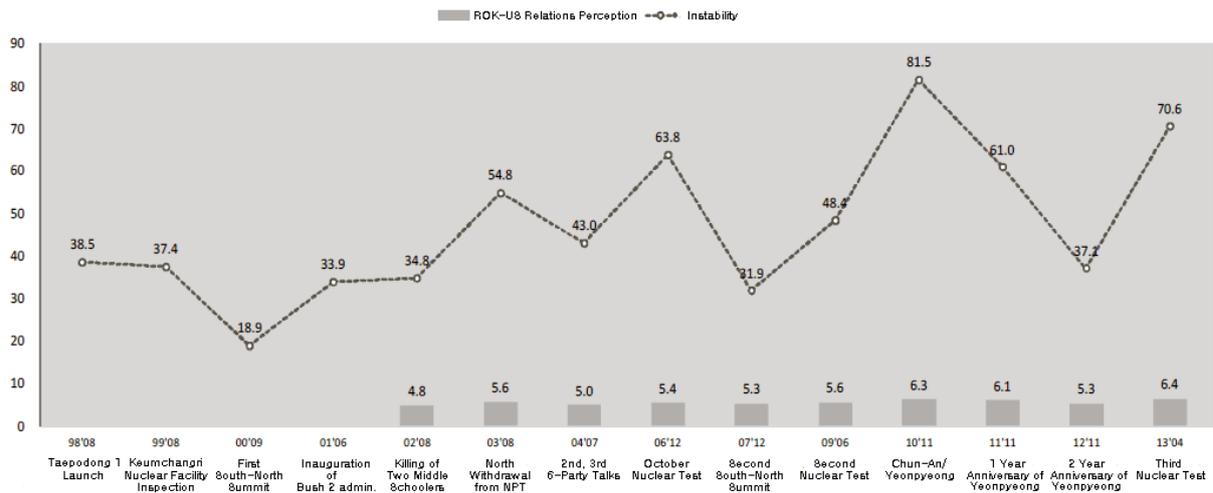
In fact, Figure 1 shows that 81.5% of people felt insecure at the time of shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010, the percentage dropped to the 37% range as direct military confrontation weakened between the two countries as shown in the November 2012 survey. However, in 2013, when North

¹ This article's earlier version "*Inter-Korean dialogue and US-ROK alliance, the public wants both*" was published by Sisa-in, a Korean weekly magazine (Issue of 292 on 22 APR 2013) as a cover story. It was edited by Hyunmin Michael Kang for this report. The views and ideas in this material are that of the author and do not represent official standpoints of the East Asia Institute (EAI).



Korea went ahead with conducting its third nuclear test and declared 'state of war' boasting the possibility of nuclear attack on U.S. mainland, triggering U.S. response of sending over Stealth B2 to the Korean peninsula, the level of public anxiety towards security soared to 70.6%. Although the percentage is lower than that during the Yeonpyeong attack, the level of security anxiety is at its highest ever since the beginning of the 2000s. Therefore, it would be more accurate to assess the calmness of South Korean public as one of mature response to North Korean threat, not as security numbness.

[Figure 1] Perceptions of security and the ROK-US relations²



Source: Survey on public perceptions of security by Korea National Defense University (1998-2003); EAI Public Survey data archive (2004-2012)

Note: The figures for security perceptions represent the share of respondents who answered extremely insecure or overall insecure. The figures for public perceptions of desirable ROK-US relations refer to the average of grades given by the people. (0~4 = The ROK should alienate itself from the US; 5 = The ROK should maintain the status quo; 6~10= The ROK-US alliance should be strengthened)

Changed perceptions of security: proliferation of ambivalent security perception

In discussing insensitivity of the South Korean public towards security conditions, the attention should be given not to the assessment of whether security numbness of the public exists and, if so, what are its consequences, but rather to the logic and frame from which this issue is raised. Criticism made by traditional conservative groups against security insensitivity mainly blames the Sunshine policy, accusing it of having indirectly supported North Korea's nuclear development and weakened South Korea's public alertness to North Korean provocations. In contrast, progressive groups argue that the U.S. and South Korea's conservative government are responsible for fomenting a war-triggering crisis through hard-line North Korea policy and criticize the people for their indifference towards politics and their lack of proper response to these situations. As such, there is an extreme political dichotomy between traditional conservatives and progressives in identifying reasons and solutions to security insensitivity

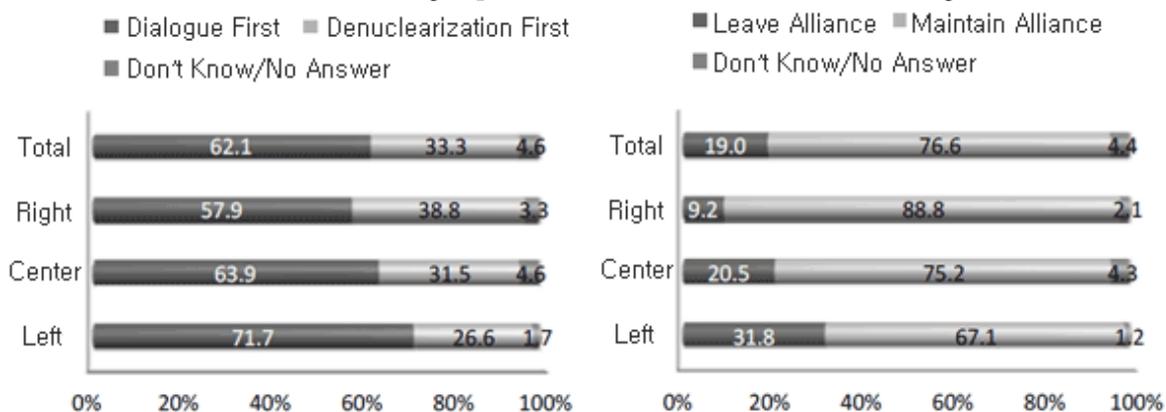
² See Nae-young Lee and Han-wool Jeong(2011; 2010).



Security perception of the South Korean public is shifting past the dichotomous framework of “progressive = pro-sunshine policy = anti-Americanism” vs. “conservative = pro-hard-line policy = pro-Americanism”(Lee and Jeong 2004; 2005). According to the survey conducted by EAI and Hankook Research Company in early January this year, 62.1% support prioritization of inter-Korean dialogue calling for “promotion of inter-Korean dialogue without linking it to North Korean nuclear issues”, while 33.3% support denuclearization first policy that no inter-Korean dialogue will be pursued before North Korean nuclear problems are resolved. With regards to the ROK-US alliance, 76.6% support a conservative approach that maintaining ROK-US alliance is favorable for South Korea’s security, while only 19.0% support the call for distancing South Korea from the US and achieving self-reliance.

What is noteworthy, in particular, is that change in South Korea’s public attitude transcends ideological boundaries and more ambivalent, balanced, and pragmatic perceptions have been proliferated. Among respondents who describe themselves as conservative, the share of those calling for inter-Korean dialogue amount to 57.9%. They say that inter-Korean dialogue should be prioritized without the precondition of denuclearization. On the other hand, among the respondents who describe themselves as progressive the share of those who support the ROK-US alliance reached 67.1%. They believe that ROK-US alliance should be maintained (Figure 2).

[Figure 2] Lines of North Korea policy (dialogue first vs. denuclearization first) and perceptions of the ROK-US alliance (abandoning dependence on the alliance vs. maintaining the alliance)



Source: EAI-Hankook Research Company <New Governmental Policy Issues Poll> (2013.1)

Note: “Right” means the respondents who identified themselves as “Conservative”, “Center” means “Middle of the road” and “Left” means “Progressive.”

In addition, when comparing public attitude towards inter-Korean issues and ROK-US relations, shift in security perception can be observed that the public do not necessarily take the traditional view in which ROK-US collaboration conflicts with inter-Korean cooperation. What is more dominant is the view that ROK-US collaboration and South-North cooperation should be pursued in parallel. The traditional conservative position that emphasizes the ROK-US alliance while calling for North Korea’s nuclear issues to be first resolved is held by only 28.7% of the total public, while only 12.9% of the total public hold the traditional progressive position that South Korea should pursue inter-Korean first by



ending dependence on the US. This shows that the percentage of those who make traditional dichotomous approach to security issues merely amount to 41.6% of the entire constituents. On the other hand, the share of those who hold a progressive position that favors inter-Korean dialogue without any precondition related to nuclear issues as well as a conservative position that favorably views the ROK-US alliance has reached to as much as 51.3%. (Figure 3)

[Figure 3] Structure of security perceptions of the South Korean public indicated by attitude towards inter-Korean relations and the ROK-US alliance

January 2013	Total of 739 Interviewees	Attitude toward ROK-US Alliance	
		Should stop depending on the alliance: 148 people (20.0%)	Should maintain the alliance: 591 people (80.0%)
Attitude toward Inter-Korean Relations	Dialogue without preconditions First 474 people (64.1%)	<u>Dialogue First based on Independence from Alliance</u> (Inter-Korean dialogue First + Distancing from ROK-US alliance) 95 people (12.9% of the total response) <Traditional progressive view>	<u>Dialogue First based on Alliance</u> (Maintain ROK-US alliance + Inter-Korean Dialogue) 379 people (51.3% of the total response) <ambivalent and balanced view>
	Denuclearization First 265 people (35.9%)	<u>Denuclearization First based on Independence from Alliance</u> (Distancing from ROK-US alliance + Denuclearization) 53 people (7.2%) <Isolationist view>	<u>Denuclearization First based on Alliance</u> (Denuclearization First + ROK-US Alliance) 212 people (28.7%) <Traditional conservative view>

Source: EAI-Hankook Research Company <New Governmental Policy Issues Poll> (2013.1)

Note: Out of the total of 800 people surveyed, 61 people who answered “Do not know” or ”No Answer” on the two questions were excluded from percentage calculation.

Reasons behind shifts in security perceptions and urgency of discussing new security strategy

What are the main reasons behind such change in perceptions? It is because the conservative and progressive ideologies have showed limitation as a frame of discussion in terms of analyzing security issues on the Korean Peninsula and presenting solutions. First of all, many Koreans see that the conservative approach prevalent in the Cold War period irritates North Korea rather than deterring them from provocations because it encourages blind dependence on ROK-US alliance and pressure against North Korea. Among South Korean people, perceptions have proliferated since the Kim Dae-jung administration that the Sunshine policy and progress in inter-Korean relations increased mutual dependence between the two Koreas, thereby discouraging reckless provocations by North Korea and lifting uncertainties in inter-Korean relations. As a result, call for prioritization of inter-Korean dialogue increased even among conservatives. However, the underlying logic of Sunshine policy that North Korea will gradually initiate Reform and Opening up policy once South Korea recognizes the



North Korean regime and increases cooperation has been faltering due to North Korea's continued military threats following the 2010 shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. This has strengthened public opinion legitimizing U.S. Forces in Korea and the ROK-US alliance as a necessary deterrent against North Korea.

The most critical reason that the existing progressive and conservative frames have failed to gain confidence is that those frames have limits in explaining the shift in reality where North Korea has gone from non-nuclear to a nuclear-armed state and did only little to provide fundamental solutions. The more one sticks to the existing dichotomous approach, the more it yields results that are diverted from original intentions. In this context, the fact that the Park Geun-hye administration has decided not to link North Korean nuclear problems with inter-Korean exchanges is assessed as a step forward compared to the Lee Myung-bak administration's reciprocal approach to inter-Korean relations. However, it is obvious that the new ROK government lacks strategies and preparations for visions regarding a nuclear North Korea. Except highlighting the basic principles of strengthening the ROK-US alliance and strongly responding to North Korean provocations, no clear processes for overcoming the current crisis are visible. The more the government emphasizes the basic principles, the more criticisms it will get for failing to exercise effective initiatives to the current situations.

On the other hand, many Korean people sympathize with progressive demand for sending a special ambassador to North Korea and resuming inter-Korean dialogue, but progressive strategic stance is unclear whether inter-Korean dialogue aims at denuclearization of North Korea or it is just a dialogue to manage the current situations after acknowledging North Korea as a nuclear state. Considering that North Korea already announced it will not give up on nuclear weapons, immediate denuclearization dialogue with North Korea seems unlikely. However, if South Korea shifts its strategy to recognize North Korea's nuclear status simply because it is desperate for a dialogue with the North, it will yield substantial consequences, the severity of which one cannot possibly imagine. In terms of international power dynamics and general sentiment of South Korea, it is difficult to accept a nuclear North Korea, and also the impact will bring about such unexpected results as more demand for the US nuclear umbrella over South Korea and a nuclear-armed South Korea.

In conclusion, both conservatives and progressives appear to be perplexed by the current situation because the problems transcend their framework. Controversy over South Korean people's numbness to security threat is merely a consuming debate. It is more urgent to prepare for an upgraded security strategy beyond ideological frames in the face of a new environment brought about by a nuclear North Korea. Against this backdrop, conservative policy-makers, politicians, and journal groups have recently begun to discuss more balanced approaches such as a "complex alliance strategy" that goes beyond the boundary of the existing ROK-US alliance or a "South-North co-evolutionary strategy that aims to overcome the limits of both Sunshine policy and the hard-line stance against North Korea. Progressives need to pay attention to and revisit former President Kim Dae-jung's view: He emphasized inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation while consistently calling for post-unification stationing of USFK and a stronger ROK-US alliance. His ideas will serve as an important clue for a new security strategy that goes beyond conservative and progressive partisanship. ■



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